

India - Studies in the History of an Idea

Edited by
Irfan Habib

2004

Aligarh Historians Society



Munshiram Manoharlal
Publishers Pvt. Ltd.

The Idea of India in Amir Khusrau

SYED ALI NADEEM REZAVI

It appears that by the thirteenth century, the concept of India as a distinct geographical entity, came into Indo-Persian literature along with an understanding of a composite culture, and, also with it, a sense of love of the country. The most prominent examples of such patriotism and ideas of a common heritage appear in the writings of Amir Khusrau, the poet-laureate of the Delhi Sultanate.

Amir Khusrau was born at Patiali in the modern district of Etah in Uttar Pradesh in 1253. His father, Amir Saifuddin Mahmud was a Turk who had migrated to India during the reign of Iltutmish, some years prior to Khusrau's birth, from the city of Kush (now known as Shahr-i Sabz) in Uzbekistan. His mother was the daughter of 'Imādul Mulk, a noble from Delhi.¹ Khusrau was a prolific writer and has left behind important works like *Qirānu-s Sa'dain*, *Miftāhu-l Futūh*, *Shīrīn wa Khusrau*, *Hasht Bihisht*, *Masnavi Dewal Rānī wa Khizr Khān*, *Matlau'l Anwār*, *I'jaz-i Khusravī*, *Khazāinu-l Futūh* and *Nuh Sipihr*.² Although in almost all these works Khusrau has left behind statements which help us understand his vision and concept of India, the *Nuh Sipihr* appears to be the most prolific in the outflow of patriotic statements.

The *Nuh Sipihr* is a *masnawī* which was completed by Khusrau in 1318 and eulogises Mubarak Shah Khalji. It appears to reflect most perfectly the ideas of Khusrau about India which he had tried to develop in his earlier works. This work is divided into nine chapters which correspond to the nine skies or spheres (*sipihr*) of the heavens. It is in the third chapter of this work that we find a long and detailed eulogy of India. Amir Khusrau proudly asserts:

¹ For a life history of Amir Khusrau see, Muhammad Wahid Mirza, *The Life and Works of Amir Khusrau*, Calcutta, 1935; Mohammad Habib, 'Hazrat Amir Khusrau of Delhi', *Politics and Society During the Early Medieval Period, Collected Works of Professor Mohammad Habib*, ed. K.A. Nizami, Aligarh, 1974, I, pp. 291-355.

² For a full list of authentic writings of Khusrau, see, Wahid Mirza, op.cit.; For an exhaustive listing of Khusrau's patriotic verse see, S. Sabahuddin Abdur Rahman, *Hindustan Amir Khusrau ki Nazar Mein*, Azamgarh, n.d. (Urdu).

If my adversary taunts me as to why I prefer (*tarjih*) *Hind* over other lands.

(I would say:) There are two reasons for this assertion (*hujjat*):

The first reason is that this land since time immemorial (has been destined)

To be the place of my birth (*maulud*), abode (*mawa*) and motherland (*watan*).³

He further justifies the praise and precedence which his motherland deserves by citing a well known tradition of the Prophet: “the love of motherland is an essential part of the true faith (*hub al-watan min al-īmān*)”. He asserts that this is an essential part of his creed (*dīn*).⁴

In the introductory section of this chapter Khusrau clarifies that the praise of India was reserved in this section as the presiding planet of both, the seventh sky (to which this chapter corresponds) and India was *zuhl* (Saturn).⁵ He claims that although ‘Rum (Greece), Khurasan (Iran) and Khotan (China)’ allege (*ta’na*) their superiority, he had knowledge of the efficacy of this country’s magic and thus could prove that *Hind* is better than any other country. For

If the Creator bestows upon me the gift

(So that) my easy flowing pen (*kilk*) may be empowered to express qualities to perfection,

I aspire not to leave the greatness of this land on earth (concealed).

But raise it to the sky upto the (height) of the heaven (*khuld-i barin*).⁶

Khusrau then goes on to enumerate seven rational (*aqli*) proofs (*asbat*) of the assertion (*hujjat*) that India was the earth’s Paradise. The first argument is that after being thrown out from heaven Adam found refuge in this country. According to him, “As *Hind* was just like heaven (*khuld nishān*), Adam could descend here and find repose”.⁷ Secondly, India was the land of the peacock, a heavenly bird. “Had Paradise (*firdaus*) been in

³ Amir Khusrau, *Nuh Sipihr*, ed. M. Wahid Mirza, Calcutta, 1950, p.150. For an English rendering of the third chapter of this work see, *India as seen by Amir Khusrau*, tr. R.Nath and Faiyaz Gwaliari, Jaipur, 1981. Some other works on this theme are: Sabahuddin Abdur Rahman, ‘Nationalist Sentiments in Indo-Persian Literature’, *Indo-Iranica*, 28, no.1, March 1965, pp.1-34; S.B.Nigam, ‘Amir Khusrau and India’, *Indo-Iranica*, 24, no.3-4, 1971, pp.67-73; Shujaat A.Sandilvi, ‘A great Indian patriot’, *Amir Khusrau Memorial Volume*, Govt.of India pub., 1975, pp.21-32.

⁴ *Nuh Sipihr*, p.150

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.147.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.148.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.151-52.

some other country (lit. garden, '*bāgh*'), this bird would have gone thither."⁸ Thirdly, the serpent, which was a companion of the peacock in heaven, also accompanied it to this land, but as this land was known for its good and beneficial deeds while the serpent had the vice of biting, it was allotted a place below the earth and not above it.⁹ Khusrau puts forward four other arguments, which include the moderate climate of India as compared with the severe climatic conditions of his Central Asian homeland¹⁰ and the tradition of the Prophet that the faithful would receive their reward not in this world but in the heaven while the unbelievers would enjoy here itself:

Hind was a Paradise for the unbelievers since the advent of Adam till the coming of Islam,

Even in recent times, these infidels (*gabar*) have had every pleasure of heaven like wine and honey.¹¹

After establishing that India was the heaven on earth, Khusrau goes on to discuss the 'reasons' of his '*preference* of Hind over Rum, Iraq, Khurasan and Qandhar' and discourses on the ideal climate of his country, its flowers, and fruits. Discussing the moderate Indian climate Khusrau remarks:

They (Khurasanians) are deafened (by the excessive cold) and do not listen to the arguments (of India being heaven)

(And) instead accuse it of possessing an extremely hot climate.

In reply (to this) I cite again what the prophet had said.

The hot weather is troublesome and that is all

But every one is killed through cold weather.¹²

Further praising the Indian climate, Khusrau says that it is so moderate that a poor peasant (*dahqan*) spends the night in the pasture-land grazing his flock with only a single worn-out cloak (*kuhn chadaraki*) wrapped around him, a Brahman can take his bath in the cold water of the river early in the morning, while a mere branch of a tree is enough to shade the poor of the country.¹³ There is the spring season (*bahār*) all the year round in India and thus an abundance of greenery and beautiful fragrant flowers which do not lose their fragrance even after they wilt.¹⁴ Among

⁸ Ibid., p.152.

⁹ Ibid., p.153.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp.154-56.

¹¹ Ibid., p.156.

¹² Ibid., p.158-59.

¹³ Ibid., p.159.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp.159-60; *Dewal Rani Khizr Khan*, Aligarh, 1917, pp.128-33.

the juicy fruits of India, Khusrau mentions mangoes (*naghzak*), bananas (*muzi*), which are extremely soft; and *nabati bamri* (? sugarcane). Cardamom (*lāchi*), camphor (*kafur*) and cloves (*qaranfal*) are mentioned by him as the dry fruits of India.¹⁵ Betel-leaf (*tanbul*) comes for special mention as a 'leaf which is eaten like a fruit (*meva*) and there is nothing elsewhere in the world like it.'¹⁶ He tells us that the betel leaf, presumably an expensive commodity at the time, was something meant for the *elite*:

The ordinary people (*ahl-i shikam*) have no taste (*zauq*) for it,
Only the high (*mihtar*) and their sons relish it.
Its special (preparation) is not for every one
Except for the *Qutb-i falak* (the king).¹⁷

Amir Khusrau's idea of India and its geographical boundaries, comes out more clearly when he mentions the different languages which the people of this country speak:

There are different languages in every area (*'arsa*) and region (*nahiyat*) of this land. Having their own special phraseology and rules which are not transient (*'ariyati*) are *Sindhi*, *Lahauri* (Punjabi), *Kashmiri*, *Kubri*, *Dhur-Samandri* (Kannada), *Tilangi* (Telugu), *Gujar* (Gujarati), *Ma'abari* (Tamil), *Gauri* (dialect of Northern Bengal), *Bengali*, *Awad* (Awadhi), *Dehli*. All around, within the boundaries of this land, are these *Hindavi* languages since olden times, and all of them are spoken by the people for all purposes.¹⁸

It is interesting to note that Marathi and Malayalam are not mentioned by Khusrau. Malayalam had not perhaps separated from Tamil by this time, but the omission of Marathi is difficult to explain unless it is represented by 'Kubri'. Dealing with the commonly spoken languages during his time (*Hindavi* and Persian) and the regional dialects, Khusrau points out:

Surely! The popularity of Turkish grew similarly.
It spread with the Turkish rule on the earth.
As it was the language of the prominent people (*khasa*).
The commoners also adopted it, and it became popular in the world.
Hind similarly got its spoken languages.
Hindavi is and has been the (spoken language) of India.

¹⁵ *Nuh Sipihr*, p.160. See also *Qiranus Sa'dain*, Aligarh, 1918, pp.33-34, 109; *Dewal Rani Khizr Khan*, pp.43-44.

¹⁶ *Nuh Sipihr*; also *Qiranus Sa'dain*, op.cit., pp.145-46; *Dewal Rani Khizr Khan*, p.43.

¹⁷ *Nuh Sipihr*, p.161.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.179-80.

The Ghurids and the Turks came, and
 Persian was spoken by them
 The people when they came into contact with them
 By and by (*beh wa beh*) acquired the knowledge of Persian.
 The other languages which were there
 Were constrained to be confined in their own areas.¹⁹

Khusrau also mentions the linguistic versatility of the Indians. He says that whereas an Indian can fluently converse in any of the foreign languages, people outside India (*aqsa-i digar*) are unable to speak 'Indian dialects' (*sukhan-i Hindi*).

The people of Khita, Mongols, Turks and Arabs
 In (speaking) Indian dialects get sewn lips
 But we can speak any language of the world
 As expertly as a shepherd tends his sheep.²⁰

Khusrau's patriotism was not just theoretical. He claims to have himself mastered the Indian languages:

In most of these people's languages
 I have gained knowledge (i.e. learnt)
 I know them, enquired about them, and can speak them
 And to an extent, more or less, have been enlightened by them.²¹

Amir Khusrau also mentions Sanskrit and its rich literature but remarks that it was the language of the Brahmans. Even amongst them not all can claim mastery over this language. Like Arabic, Sanskrit has its grammar, definitions, system, techniques, rules and literature.²² Further:

This language (Sanskrit) has the quality of a pearl amongst pearls
 It is inferior to Arabic, but superior to Dari (Persian)²³

Khusrau with great pride mentions that scholars from all over the world come to India to gain knowledge and expertise. However a Brahman never leaves the boundaries of India to acquire knowledge as there is no need for it.²⁴

Brahmans in their knowledge and intellect
 Are far superior to (the knowledge of) all the books of Aristotle...
 Whatever the Greek revealed in philosophical thought to the world

¹⁹ Ibid., p.178.

²⁰ Ibid., p.166.

²¹ Ibid., pp.172-73.

²² Ibid., p.180.

²³ Ibid., p.181; also *Dewal Rani Khizr Khan*, 41-43.

²⁴ *Nuh Sipihr*, p. 167, also p.169.

The Brahmans have a greater wealth (of it)".²⁵

However these Brahmans are by nature quite and do not speak much, so that most of their knowledge remains hidden from the world and tends generally to be misunderstood. Khusrau however counts himself amongst those who acknowledge their virtues and qualities:

As nobody has tried to learn from the Brahmans
They have remained unrevealed.
But I to an extent have done a bit of research in this matter
(And after) putting a stamp of confidence on their heart
Have gained some insight into their secrets (of learning).
Whatever I could grasp has not been contradicted (from any quarter)
so far.²⁶

Dealing with the superior knowledge and learning of the Indians, he remarks:

I may be slightly biased in my views
Yet whatever I will submit, I shall justify
Though there are men of letters (elsewhere),
Nowhere is wisdom (*danish*) and philosophy (*hikmat*) so well
written."²⁷

Logic (*mantiq*), astrology (*tanjim*) and scholastic theology (*kalām*), except *fiqh* (Islamic law), are found and well understood in India. All rational sciences, the natural sciences (*tabi'iyi*) and Mathematics (*riyazi*) originated in India.²⁸ Regarding the Indian origin of the numerals (*hindsa*), Khusrau writes:

Even if Wisdom ('*aql*) makes a detour of the world
It will not find such a gift of *hikmat* (i.e. arithmetic)
Take 'zero' for instance, which is a blank mark in itself
When used along with something else, becomes meaningful
When the science of mathematics (*riyazi*) developed from it
The Book *Almagest* (of Ptolemy) and Euclid came into existence
When this science of numerals with its addition and subtraction
Is not based on this system it becomes zero.
The scholars have not been able to add to (the science of *hindsa*)
And it has remained unchanged since its origin.
The inventor of it was one Asa, a Brahman
And in this there is no doubt

²⁵ Ibid., p. 162.

²⁶ Ibid., p.163.

²⁷ Ibid., p.161.

²⁸ Ibid., p.162.

From him (this science) got its name *Hind Asa*,
Which was shortened by the intelligent to *hindsa*.
Creator of this science was a Brahman
And however strange it may appear
The Greek science came to depend on it.²⁹

Apart from the invention of the numerals, especially zero, Amir Khusrau also mentions the invention of chess (*shatranj*) by the Indians which according to him was 'a unique contribution of *Hind* to the world'.³⁰ A similar contribution of India to world culture was the '*Kalila wa Dimna*' or the *Panchatantra*, which had such an 'excellent flight of imagination'.³¹ Another singular contribution of the Indians which Khusrau mentions is Indian music and its hypnotising effect even on the animals.³²

Apart from all this Khusrau's patriotism makes him sing paeans for the Indian female beauty,³³ Indian clothes,³⁴ and even its animals.³⁵ He singles out the Indian parrot (*tuti*), magpie (*sharak*), crow, skylark, wood-pecker, crane (*bagula*), peacock, monkey and elephant which were unique in the world due to their intelligence. As to wine, he exclaims: "Give me wine, but not of any other country. Give me wine of this country(the juice of sugarcane)."³⁶

India in the eyes of Amir Khusrau was not only his *watan* but a geographic, cultural and multi-religious entity. In one of his works Khusrau mentions a Hindu who worships fire. When asked why he did so, he replied that the burning fire lights a divine yearning in him and a desire to attain annihilation (*fanā*) in order to gain eternal life (*baqā*). Khusrau lauds this feeling.³⁷ Although a second generation migrant to India, Khusrau appears to have fully imbibed the idea of India as a unique country, distinct in many ways from other countries. To quote:

How exhilarating is the climate of this country
Where so many birds sing melodiously.

²⁹ Ibid., p.168.

³⁰ Ibid., p.170.

³¹ Ibid., p.169.

³² Ibid., pp.170-72.

³³ *Dewal Rani Khizr Khan*, pp.133-34; see also *Shirin wa Khusrau*, Aligarh, 1925, pp.25-29; *Hasht Bihisht*, Aligarh, 1918, pp.29-30.

³⁴ *Qiranus Sa'dain*, p.132; *Dewal Rani Khizr Khan*, p.43.

³⁵ *Nuh Sipahr*, pp.181-91.

³⁶ Ibid., p.210.

³⁷ *Dewal Rani Khizr Khan*, pp.195-96.

Poets, composers and singers rise from this land
 As abundantly and as naturally as the grass....
 How great is this land which produces men
 Who deserve to be called men!
 Intelligence is the natural gift of this land,
 Even the illiterate are as good as scholars
 There cannot be a better teacher than the way of life of the people
 It is this which enlightens the masses. It is a gift of the Almighty!
 This is very rare in other countries
 It is the effect of the cultural environment of this land....
 If perchance any Iranian, Greek, or Arab comes by,
 He will not have to ask for anything
 Because they will treat him as their own.
 They will play an excellent host and win his heart!
 Even if they indulge in humour with him
 They also know how to smile like a flower.³⁸

With the glory of India, Khusrau cannot help linking his own fame!

No wizard in the art of poetry like Khusrau exists under the sun
 Because *Khusrau belongs to India* and he is the admirer of *Qutb-i Alam* (the Sultan).
 Even if Jupiter, who is the wisest of the Celestial beings, comes from the sky
 He would also not raise any doubt (to this statement)
 And will acknowledge its truth.³⁹

³⁸ *Nuh Sipihr*, pp.442-43.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.172.